

Book Review: Carmona M (ed.) (2014) *Explorations in Urban Design: an Urban Design Research Primer*, Farnham, Ashgate.

This extensive and well-illustrated volume provides a comprehensive overview of the field of urban design, bringing together contributions from 32 researchers in the Bartlett School at University College London, including the editor himself. Matthew Carmona has brought his considerable urban design knowledge to editing the collection, blending a diverse range of recent research into a coherent and engaging text which will offer readers many insights into the field. Additionally, as a research 'primer' it also offers something to inspire those wishing to engage in urban design research themselves by exploring the range of theoretical and methodological approaches that underpin this research. It will appeal to a broad range of readers, from both within and beyond urban design, from postgraduate students embarking on dissertations and theses to established built environment scholars and practitioners. The research contributions are grouped according to their focus and approach into five sections; philosophical approaches, process investigations, physical explorations, propositional experiments and performance inquiry. The contributing chapters, 5 or 6 in each section, are concise and clearly written and structured, providing a useful reference source which can be 'dipped in and out of'. Care has been taken to avoid the overuse of obscure disciplinary 'languages' which might hinder rather than engage a multi-disciplinary audience and discussion of ideas is rigorous yet also accessible for those with differing backgrounds in built environment scholarship.

Carmona's postscript outlines the impetus for the book, which stemmed from his concerns at the separation of urban design courses within the Bartlett School, operating in academic 'silos' which hindered the cross-fertilization of ideas. This not merely an issue which besets urban design but is something that concerns urban research and management more broadly. This book therefore offers a welcome contribution to this wider project by providing both a flavour of the diversity of urban design as a discipline, and an attempt to highlight cross-cutting themes and ideas through Carmona's contextual chapter and his introductions to each section of the book. Carmona's introductory chapter provides an overview of the development and scope of urban design which will be of interest to both those familiar with, and those new, to the field. He considers debates around the identity of urban design and how the discipline connects to, and draws ideas from, fields of allied knowledge such as planning and architecture. However he contends that the diverse, 'mongrel' nature of urban design is healthy and important for crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to address the 'wicked' problems that stem from the complex messiness of contemporary cities. The issues and debates raised here will certainly resonate with those within other built environment disciplines, grappling with issues of disciplinary identity and focus.

The rest of the primer is designed to take the reader through particular meta-approaches to researching urban design in a deliberate attempt to try and cut across the limits of disciplinary classifications of research. In a further attempt to draw out wider themes, the research presented within each section is 'placed' in terms of three fundamental characteristics of research; primary/secondary evidence, subjective/objective inquiry and inductive/deductive approach, and presented using a triangle graphic to illustrate its key characteristics. This is quite a useful device linking the contributions together and emphasising their place within urban research more broadly. Having said this, readers might quibble with the placement of some chapters, although the editor acknowledges that the research presented frequently overlaps and often spans more than one section. This reflects the nature of much contemporary research that blends sources, methods and approaches and overall the logic of the grouping of contributions is clear.

The first section considers how urban design is engaging with a range of critical urban theories, including non-representational theory and post-colonial critiques. There is much here for others to consider how their research and practice engages with these wider ideas of the city as fluid, messy and diverse. Section two considers the process of design itself as an area for research, considering a diverse range of examples, including reviews of public space and street design projects to analysis of planning policy documents and the research challenges produced by the generation of data from 'smart cities'. Section three is concerned with explorations of the physical structure of cities and how this changes over time. Contributions are split between quantitative approaches using computing technology to understand and simulate urban development, drawing mainly on space syntax tools and approaches for which researchers at the Bartlett are well known, and historical, observational analysis grounded in traditions from urban morphological study. Section four presents a series of propositional experiments, which provide different 'takes' on design processes and projects. These are again wide ranging, considering both more traditional urban design practice to more creative approaches applying writing, collage and story-telling to design practice. A chapter considering design practice in cities in the Global South calls on urban design to 'de-colonise' and reconstruct in ways which can engage with the cultural differences in places where western design solutions have often been unproductively imposed. For planning scholars the final chapter in this section offers an interesting critical analysis of New Town design, employing a space syntax approach to assess the accessibility failings of their street layouts. The final section of the book, considering how places perform through use and time, is perhaps the most eclectic, including contributions employing anthropological investigation, stakeholder inquiry and historical analysis. Quentin Stevens' chapter highlights how people's use space is not always as intended by designers, which links usefully to the final chapter by Carmona which considers how to examine the success of urban design projects.

This book certainly opened my eyes to the breadth of urban design research being undertaken. It is well placed to fulfil its editor's ambitions to highlight the vibrancy of urban design as a discipline and contribute to the building of understanding across built environment disciplinary and professional divides which often constrain examination of the complex problems associated with urban areas in the 21st Century.

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